

Deep sadness reigns over the Shortgrass Country. Ranchers are feeding their way through another dry winter; fossil fuel miners' hopes and happenings are in a downspin of serious layoffs and stacked drilling rigs. County governments and school districts face huge drops in revenue from the cheap oil and natural gas; bankers don't look up from their desks until close to closing time.

Convenience stores and coffee houses, the very backbone of the West Texas towns, are as empty of customers as if the towns were evacuated to go to a district football game. Where scratched lottery tickets once fluttered to the floor of the stores in the wake of the boom, the tickets are rolled in tight little balls and thrown in the trash.

Things are worse farther west. I stopped in Barnhart for a Diet 7UP last week on the way to the ranch. The last time I'd seen a lady in Barnhart smile as warmly as the cashier was in 1949 at a Christmas dance up at the school when the band leader mixed everybody in a set called "Paul Jones." (A "Paul Jones" is the dance where the men form a circle around a circle of women to give dancers new partners when a whistle is blown. It is still my favorite dance as I was 23 years old before I stopped being too bashful to ask a girl to dance on my own.)

However, the fixers and arrangers over in San Angelo must still be doing good. In October last year, I started hunting for a lawyer to write a simple document. Four

members of the family are licensed attorneys, however, they work in other fields of law. I'd been using the *Ask a Lawyer* column in the newspaper for advice until this matter arose. Just the thought of a doorplate carrying lawyers' names in bronze letters causes me to tremble like a fashion show judge caught with a run in her stocking.

In the days when my family vowed to regain dominion over the mineral and surface estate of Grandfather Noelke's lands whatever the cost, piles of dough were spent on legal fees at a big Angelo law firm, matching the oil company's determination to rule. Took several fall and spring sessions of district court to teach us the advantage of being level-headed over being hard-headed.

The puzzling thing about being ignored was that landowners, large or small, get into scrapes far out of proportion to their net worth, or the realm of reality. Less than a fortnight before Christmas, one of the city's dreadnoughts of the courtroom admitted at a party how much he envied the smooth way one of the other trial lawyers in town converted legal charges into acres.

Several weeks were wasted waiting for tips to pay off on calls to independents, who were said to need the business. It didn't help matters for President Clinton to come on TV in January and tell everyone how well the country was doing. But I sure couldn't fault Mr. Clinton, because I'd been laying it on pretty heavy at the bank for seven

straight state of the nation anniversaries how well I was doing.

And I was ready to do the same at the law offices. So when I'd call a new prospect I'd tell the secretary, "Been a little oil strike out here at the ranch. Maybe a will gonna' be contested and a title disputed over a divorce settlement involving an out of wedlock heir. If ol' Henry still got his courthouse coat and britches, I might be needing him." (A cornpone act makes urbanites think we country people are quaint provincials unaware of our wealth.)

For three weeks, one prominent arranger had me believing he was right on the verge of writing the document. Over the wire, he sounded like he just needed to press the print tab on his computer to be finished. When he stopped returning my calls, I began looking through the yellow pages again. Late one afternoon, I found a familiar name hidden in a long list of barristers. His secretary put my call right through. He set his fee and agreed to do the work. Two weeks later, he mailed out the first draft.

By the next week the deal was finished in spite of his being sick with laryngitis. But I was so glad to be through, I didn't demand the customary 50 percent discount due a client for the temporary loss of his lawyer's voice. (The loss of voice by a barrister is called the doctrine of *voce-perdia*, but that might be wrong. *Voce-perdia* might be a mountain range in southeast Spain, and again it may not be. Maybe I'd better get back to you on this.)

Guess that'll show those San Angelo smart alecks who didn't bother to return my call. By the time this wreck is over, they are going to be easier to find ...